

Howser Out as Yankee Manager

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Gene Michael, new Yankee manager, leaving Stadium yesterday.

By MURRAY CHASS

Dick Howser, who said six weeks ago that he would not walk away from his job as manager of the New York Yankees, relinquished it yesterday and was succeeded by Gene Michael, the general manager.

George Steinbrenner, the team's principal owner, ended the latest extended episode in the affair by announcing that Howser had resigned the position he had

held for one year and 24 days. But some of Howser's remarks, particularly his refusal to comment on some questions, seemed to leave open the question whether he had resigned or been dismissed.

"Were you fired?" he was asked at a news conference.

"I'm not going to comment on that," Howser said.

"I didn't fire the man," Steinbrenner said.

Nevertheless, the relationship between manager and owner had grown strained during the season, even though the Yankees won 103 games, the most in the major leagues. There were disagreements over strategy and handling of players, and after the Yankees were swept by the Kansas City Royals in the

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Howser Resigns; Michael Is Named Yankees' Manager

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American League pennant playoff six weeks ago, Howser's return as manager was believed doubtful. A resignation presumably was thought to be less damaging than an outright dismissal.

Steinbrenner, Howser and Michael were the principals at the two-hour news conference held in Steinbrenner's Yankee Stadium office.

Howser is 43 years old. For nearly three weeks, he had spoken almost daily with Steinbrenner on the telephone, and he said yesterday that he was undertaking a business venture in his hometown, Tallahassee, Fla., and that he would remain with the Yankees by becoming their scouting supervisor for the Southeastern section of the country. He declined to give details of the business venture except to say that it involved real estate and real estate development.

Although Steinbrenner said Howser could have returned as manager for the second year of his three-year contract, a change had been considered imminent for weeks. As soon as Steinbrenner's latest unhappiness with Howser became apparent three weeks ago, it was reported that Michael would be the man to replace Howser if a change was made.

"I could have said no," Michael, a 42-year-old former shortstop, said yesterday. "George said, 'You can say no and continue to do what you're doing.' But I knew he wanted me to do it. I have no qualms about managing. I like it. It's a challenge."

It was a challenge to Howser, too, and that was one reason he left his job as baseball coach at Florida State University to replace Billy Martin as the Yankees' manager on Oct. 28, 1979. Now, after Howser's brief tenure, Michael becomes the 25th manager in Yankee history and the seventh since Steinbrenner became the principal owner eight years ago. Michael was given a multi-year contract. Only two

other major league teams have had as many managers in that time. The Oakland A's and the Texas Rangers each have had eight.

Steinbrenner was disappointed in Howser because the Yankees had not won the American league pennant. Last month, the day after the Royals completed their three-game sweep of New York in the pennant playoff, the owner said he did not know if he would seek another manager. Howser, for his part, said he wanted to stay.

"This is where I want to be," Howser, formerly a Yankee coach, said in an interview then. "The reason I came back was to manage the Yankees, not just to manage . . . I'm certainly not going to walk away from this thing. I look forward to coming back, but it's not my decision."

At yesterday's news conference, though, Steinbrenner said the decision had been Howser's alone.

"All of the discussions that have taken place," the owner said, "were to make sure that he was making the decision that he really wanted to make. The door was open for him to return. He made the decision, and frankly, knowing what I do and seeing what is available to him, it seems so unbelievable to me. I would find it hard myself to turn it down."

"I think it's an outstanding offer for him from a financial standpoint, from the standpoint of equity and his future."

Howser: 'Couldn't Do Both'

Steinbrenner was referring to the real estate venture Howser had opted for. Though there was no confirmation, it was believed that Steinbrenner would pay in advance the \$200,000 remaining on Howser's contract and that it was this that was enabling Howser to get into business now.

"I couldn't do both," Howser said, referring to managing and his business enterprise. "It was a decision on my part which area to go to. I couldn't

Yankees' postseason failure and Howser delay it. I was almost late getting into it as it was. I had to push for 10 days to two weeks to get into this. It's something I have to be with."

Just before making those remarks, Howser had been asked why he did not want to continue managing the Yankees. He paused for several seconds before answering.

"I have to be a little cautious here," he finally said tentatively. "I enjoyed my managing with the Yankees, but this other thing just popped up. It's difficult — it's a difficult thing for me to answer."

Steinbrenner reiterated that he had laid down no rules of behavior under which Howser would have had to continue as manager. But when Howser was asked about rules or conditions, he said, "I'd rather not comment on that."

Nor would he comment when asked if he had been discharged. When Steinbrenner was asked the same question, he said:

"He was not fired. If Dick doesn't want to comment, for whatever reason, that's up to him. But he was not fired."

Steinbrenner said there would now be no position of general manager, a job Michael held for a year. The owner said Cedric Tallis, the executive vice president, and Bill Bergesch, vice president for baseball operations, would handle the general manager's duties.

But Steinbrenner also disclosed that he might appoint a president in the near future. That job has been vacant since Al Rosen resigned in July 1979. Steinbrenner said he had offered Rosen the job twice in the last six months but that Rosen had preferred to go to Houston, where he joined the Astros last month. Steinbrenner said he did not expect Tal Smith, the man Rosen replaced in Houston, to be available because Smith was still linked with the group of dissident limited partners trying to oust John McMullen as general partner of the Astros.

It was believed that Steinbrenner

was considering Lou Saban, a former professional and college football coach, for the president's job. Saban, who left his latest coaching job, at Army, last July, has been working for Steinbrenner, helping him operate Florida Downs, the race track near Tampa, Fla., that Steinbrenner recently purchased.

The mood of the news conference was pleasant despite the awkward moments that Howser's "no comment's" could have created. Steinbrenner said later he couldn't understand why Howser declined to answer certain questions.

The owner limited the news conference to newsmen who had regularly covered the club. He apparently wanted to avoid what he felt would be a circus atmosphere with clusters of television cameras, still cameras, microphones and tape recorders. The 14 reporters and columnists who attended had been informed of the news conference by telephone, and anyone else who had heard of it but had not been invited was not permitted past the Yankee Stadium lobby.

Howser and Steinbrenner held the final telephone conversation in their long series Thursday. That is when they both knew for certain that Howser would not be returning as manager.

"I'm not bitter about this thing," said Howser. "I still enjoy this organization. I want to be a part of this organization. Whatever way it's written, I can walk out of here and feel good about it. I'm still in baseball. I know it's not managing the Yankees, but it's still with the organization, and the job has some responsibility. It's not a freebie; I'd never want that."

He said that the friend who had got him into the real estate enterprise first mentioned it in August and again in September. He said he had told the friend he would have to wait until after the season to consider it. He and Steinbrenner said the developments — the



The New York Times / Larry C. Morris

Gene Michael leaving Yankee Stadium yesterday

er's business opportunity — had been coincidental, but neither would speculate on what Howser might have done if the Yankees had won the pennant and the World Series.

After the news conference, Howser also was asked about his reluctance to answer certain questions.

"There are just some things I don't want to comment on," he said. "I'd like to leave things as they are."

As things are, Michael will be undertaking his sixth job for the Yankees in six years. Beginning in 1976, after he retired as a player who had batted .229 in his career, Michael served as roving coach, administrative assistant to Steinbrenner, first base coach for the Yankees, manager of their Columbus farm team and general manager of the parent club. Now he becomes the manager.

"From the first time I knew him as a player," Steinbrenner said, "I liked his leadership on the field, I liked the way he worked with young players and I liked him because he was tough. He has experience up here [in the office] and down there [on the field]. Like Dick, he has another dimension that puts him above the ordinary guy."

Michael said he had known that his ever-changing career might lead to managing in the major leagues. "I never managed here before, so I don't know how I'm going to do," he said. "But I'll be very enthusiastic about it, and I'll be positive."

It appears that however Michael does as a manager, his future with the Yankees is secure. "I trust that Gene will be around here when they're talking about redoing Yankee Stadium again," Steinbrenner said.